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By W. Somerset Maugham

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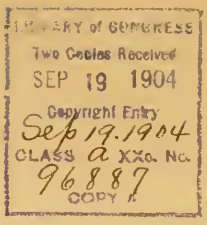

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

PART ONE

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

CHAPTER I

ALL her life Miss Elizabeth Dwarris had been a sore trial to her relations. A woman of means, she ruled tyrannously over a large number of impecunious cousins, using her bank-balance like the scorpions of Rehoboam to chastise them, and, like many another pious creature, for their soul's good making all and sundry excessively miserable. Nurtured in the evangelical ways current in her youth, she insisted that her connections should seek salvation according to her own lights; and, with harsh tongue and with bitter gibe, made it her constant business to persuade them of their extreme unworthiness. She arranged lives as she thought fit, and ventured not only to order the costume and habits, but even the inner thought of those about her: the Last Judgment could have no terrors for any that had faced her searching examination. She invited to stay with her in succession various poor ladies who presumed on a distant tie to call her Aunt Eliza, and they accepted her summons, more imperious than a royal command, with gratitude by no means unmixed with fear, bearing the servitude meekly as a cross which in the future would meet due testamentary reward.

Miss Dwarris loved to feel her power. During these long visits—for, in a way, the old lady was very hospitable—she made it her especial object to break the spirit of her guests; and it entertained her hugely to see the mildness with which were borne her extravagant demands, the humility with which every inclination was crushed. She took a malicious pleasure in publicly affronting persons, ostensibly to bend a sinful

pride, or in obliging them to do things which they particularly disliked. With a singular quickness for discovering the points on which they were most sensitive, she attacked every weakness with blind invective till the sufferer writhed before her, raw and bleeding: no defect, physical or mental, was protected from her raillery, and she could pardon as little an excess of avoirdupois as a want of memory. Yet, with all her heart, she despised her victims, she flung in their face insolently their mercenary spirit, vowing that she would never leave a penny to such a pack of weak fools; it delighted her to ask for advice in the distribution of her property among charitable societies, and she heard, with unconcealed hilarity, their unwilling and confused suggestions.

With one of her relations only, Miss Dwarris found it needful to observe a certain restraint, for Miss Ley, perhaps the most distant of her cousins, was as plain-spoken as herself, and had, besides, a far keener wit whereby she could turn rash statements to the utter ridicule of the speaker. Nor did Miss Dwarris precisely dislike this independent spirit; she looked upon her in fact with a certain degree of affection and not a little fear. Miss Ley, seldom lacking a repartee, appeared really to enjoy the verbal contests, from which, by her greater urbanity, readiness, and knowledge, she usually emerged victorious: it confounded, but at the same time almost amused, the elder lady that a woman so much poorer than herself, with no smaller claims than others to the coveted inheritance, should venture not only to be facetious at her expense, but even to carry war into her very camp. Miss Ley, really not grieved to find some one to whom without prickings of conscience she could speak her whole mind, took a grim pleasure in pointing out to her cousin the poor logic of her observations or the foolish unreason of her acts. No cherished opinion of Miss Dwarris was safe from satire—even her evangelicism was laughed at, and the rich old woman, unused to argument, was easily driven into self-contradiction;

and then—for the victor took no pains to conceal her triumph—she grew pale and speechless with rage. The quarrels were frequent, but Miss Dwarris, though it was a sharp thorn in her flesh that the first advances must be made by her, in the end always forgave; yet at last it was inevitable that a final breach should occur. The cause thereof, characteristically enough, was very trivial.

Miss Ley, accustomed, when she went abroad in the winter, to let her little flat in Chelsea, had been obliged by unforeseen circumstances to return to England while her tenants were still in possession; and had asked Miss Dwarris whether she might stay with her in Old Queen Street. The old tyrant, much as she hated her relations, hated still more to live alone; she needed some one on whom to vent her temper, and through the illness of a niece, due to spend March and April with her, had been forced to pass a month of solitude; she wrote back, in the peremptory fashion which, even with Miss Ley, she could not refrain from using, that she expected her on such and such a day by such and such a train. It is not clear whether there was in the letter anything to excite in Miss Ley a contradictory spirit, or whether her engagements really prevented it; but, at all events, she answered that her plans made it more convenient to arrive on the day following and by a different train. Miss Dwarris telegraphed that, unless her guest came on the day and at the hour mentioned in her letter, she could not send the carriage to meet her, to which the younger lady replied concisely: "Don't."

"She's as obstinate as a pig," muttered Miss Dwarris, reading the telegram; and she saw in her mind's eye the thin smile on her cousin's mouth when she wrote that one indifferent word. "I suppose she thinks she's very clever."

Her hostess greeted Miss Ley, notwithstanding, with a certain grim affability reserved only for her; she was, at all events, the least detestable of her relations, and, though neither docile nor polite, at least was never tedious. Her conversa-

tion braced Miss Dwarris so that with her she was usually at her best, and sometimes, forgetting her overbearing habit, showed herself a sensible and entertaining woman, of not altogether unamiable disposition.

"You're growing old, my dear," said Miss Dwarris, when they sat down to dinner, looking at her guest with eyes keen to detect wrinkles and crowsfeet.

"You flatter me," Miss Ley retorted; "antiquity is the only excuse for a woman who has determined on a single life."

"I suppose, like the rest of them, you would have married if any one had asked you."

Miss Ley smiled.

"Two months ago an Italian prince offered me his hand and heart, Eliza."

"A Papist would do anything," replied Miss Dwarris. "I suppose you told him your income and he found he'd misjudged the strength of his affections."

"I refused him because he was so virtuous."

"I shouldn't have thought at your age you could afford to pick and choose, Polly."

"Allow me to observe that you have an amiable faculty of thinking of one subject at one time in two diametrically opposed ways."

Miss Ley was a slender woman of middle size, her hair, very plainly arranged, beginning to turn gray, and her face, already much wrinkled, by its clear precision of feature indicating a comfortable strength of character; her lips, thin but expressive, mobile, added to this appearance of determination. She was by no means handsome, and had certainly never been pretty; but her carriage was not without grace nor her manner without fascination. Her eyes were very bright and so shrewd as sometimes to be almost disconcerting: without words, they could make pretentiousness absurd; and most affectatious, under that searching glance,

part contemptuous, part amused, willingly hid themselves. Yet, as Miss Dwarris took care to remind her, she was not without her own especial pose, but it was carried out so admirably, with such a restrained, comely decorum, that few observed it, and such as did found not the heart to condemn: it was the perfect art that concealed itself. To execute this æsthetic gesture, it pleased Miss Ley to dress with the greatest possible simplicity, usually in black, and her only ornament was a renaissance jewel of such exquisite beauty that no museum would have disdained to possess it: this she wore around her neck attached to a long gold chain, and she fingered it with pleasure to show, according to her plain-spoken relative, the undoubted beauty of her hands. Her well-fitting shoes and the elaborate open-work of her silk stockings suggested also a not unreasonable pride in a shapely foot, small and high of instep. Thus attired, when she had visitors, Miss Ley sat in an oak, Italian straight-backed chair, delicately carved, which was placed between two windows against the wall; and she cultivated already a certain primness of manner which made very effective the audacious criticism of life wherewith she was used to entertain her friends.

Two mornings after her arrival in Old Queen Street, Miss Ley announced her intention to go out. She came downstairs with a very fashionable parasol—a purchase on her way through Paris.

"You're not going out with that thing?" cried Miss Dwarris, scornfully.

"I am indeed."

"Nonesense; you must take an umbrella. It's going to rain."

"I have a new sunshade and an old umbrella, Eliza: I feel certain it will be fine."

"My dear, you know nothing about the English climate. I tell you it will pour cats and dogs."

"Fiddlesticks, Eliza."

"Polly," answered Miss Dwarris, her temper rising. "I wish you to take an umbrella. The barometer is going down, and I have a tingling in my feet, which is a sure sign of wet. It's very irreligious of you to presume to say what the weather is going to be."

"I venture to think that, meteorologically, I am no less acquainted with the ways of Providence than you."

"That I think is not funny, but blasphemous, Polly. In my house, I expect people to do as I tell them, and I insist on your taking an umbrella."

"Don't be absurd, Eliza."

Miss Dwarris rang the bell and, when the butler appeared, ordered him to fetch her own umbrella for Miss Ley.

"I absolutely refuse to use it," said the younger lady, smiling.

"Pray remember that you are my guest, Polly."

"And, therefore, entitled to do exactly as I like."

Miss Dwarris rose to her feet, a massive old woman of commanding presence, and stretched out a threatening hand.

"If you leave this house without an umbrella, you shall not come into it again. You shall never cross this threshold so long as I am alive."

Miss Ley cannot have been in the best of humours that morning, for she pursed her lips in the manner already characteristic of her, and looked at her elderly cousin with a cold scorn, most difficult to bear.

"My dear Eliza, you have a singularly exaggerated idea of your importance. Are there no hotels in London? You appear to think I stay with you for pleasure rather than to mortify my flesh. And, really, the cross is growing too heavy for me, for I think you must have quite the worst cook in the metropolis."

"She's been with me for five and twenty years," answered Miss Dwarris, two red spots appearing on her cheeks, "and

no one has ventured to complain of the cooking before. If any of my guests had done so, I should have answered that what was good enough for me was a great deal too good for any one else. I know that you're obstinate, Polly, and quick-tempered, and this impertinence I am willing to overlook. Do you still refuse to do as I wish?"

"Yes."

Miss Dwarris rang the bell violently.

"Tell Martha to pack Miss Ley's boxes at once, and call a four-wheeler," she cried, in tones of thunder.

"Very well, Madam," answered the butler, used to his mistress's vagaries.

Then Miss Dwarris turned to her guest, who observed her with irritating good-humour.

"I hope you realise, Polly, that I fully mean what I say."

"All is over between us," answered Miss Ley, mockingly, "and shall I return your letters and your photographs?"

Miss Dwarris sat for a while, in silent anger, watching her cousin, who took up the *Morning Post*, and, with great calmness, read the fashionable intelligence. Presently the butler announced that the four-wheeler was at the door.

"Well, Polly, so you're really going?"

"I can hardly stay when you've had my boxes packed and sent for a cab," replied Miss Ley, mildly.

"It's your own doing; I don't wish you to go. If you'll confess that you were headstrong and obstinate, and if you'll take an umbrella, I am willing to let bygones be bygones."

"Look at the sun," answered Miss Ley.

And, as if actually to annoy the tyrannous old woman, the shining rays danced into the room and made importunate patterns on the carpet.

"I think I should tell you, Polly, that it was my intention to leave you ten thousand pounds in my will. This intention I shall, of course, not now carry out."

"You'd far better leave your money to the Dwarris peo-

ple: upon my word, considering that they've been related to you for over sixty years, I think they thoroughly deserve it."

"I shall leave my money to whom I choose," cried Miss Dwarris, beside herself; "and if I want to I shall leave every penny of it in charity. You're very independent because you have a beggarly five hundred a year, but, apparently, it isn't enough for you to live without letting your flat when you go away. Remember, that no one has any claims upon me, and I can make you a rich woman."

Miss Ley replied with great deliberation.

"My dear, I have a firm conviction that you will live for another thirty years to plague the human race in general and your relations in particular. It is not worth my while, on the chance of surviving you, to submit to the caprices of a very ignorant old woman, presumptuous and overbearing, dull and pretentious."

Miss Dwarris gasped and shook with rage, but the other proceeded without mercy.

"You have plenty of poor relations—bully them. Vent your spite and ill-temper on those wretched sycophants, but pray in future spare me the infinite tediousness of your conversation."

Miss Ley had ever a discreet passion for the rhetorical, and there was a certain grandiloquence about the phrase which entertained her hugely. She felt that it was unanswerable, and, with great dignity, walked out. No communication passed between the two ladies, though Miss Dwarris, peremptory, stern, and evangelical to the end, lived in full possession of her faculties for another twenty years. She died at last in a passion occasioned by some trifling misdemeanour of her maid; and as though a heavy yoke were removed from their shoulders, her family heaved a deep and unanimous sigh of relief.

They attended her funeral with dry eyes, looking still with

silent terror at the leaden coffin which contained the remains of that harsh, strong, domineering old woman. Then, nervously expectant, they begged the family solicitor to disclose her will. Written with her own hand, and witnessed by two servants, it was in these terms:

> "I, Elizabeth Ann Dwarris, of 79, Old Queen Street, Westminster, Spinster, hereby revoke all former Wills and Testamentary Dispositions, made by me and declare this to be my last Will and Testament. I appoint Mary Ley, of 72, Eliot Mansions, Chelsea, to be the executrix of this my Will, and I give all my real and personal property whatsoever to the said Mary Ley. To my great-nephews and great-nieces, to my cousins near and remote, I give my blessing; and I beseech them to bear in mind the example and advice which for many years I have given them. I recommend them to cultivate in future strength of character and an independent spirit; I venture to remind them that the humble will never inherit this earth, for their reward is to be awaited in the life to come; and I desire them to continue the subscriptions which, at my request, they have so long and generously made to the Society for the Conversion of the Jews and to the Additional Curates Fund.
>
> "In witness whereof, I have set my hand to this my Will the 4th day of April, 1883.
>
> "Elizabeth Ann Dwarris."

To her amazement, Miss Ley found herself at the age of fifty-seven in possession of nearly three thousand pounds a year, the lease of a pleasant old house in Westminster, and a great quantity of early Victorian furniture. The will was written two days after her quarrel with the eccentric old woman, and the terms of it certainly achieved the three purposes for which it was designed: it occasioned the utmost surprise to all concerned; it heaped coals of fire on Miss Ley's indifferent head; and caused the bitterest disappointment and vexation to all that bore the name of Dwarris.

PART II

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

CHAPTER I

Miss Ley returned to England at the end of February. Unlike the most of her compatriots, she did not go abroad to see the friends with whom she spent much time at home; and though Bella and Herbert Field were at Naples, Mrs. Murray in Rome, she took care systematically to avoid them. Rather was it her practice to cultivate chance acquaintance, for she thought the English in foreign lands betrayed their idiosyncrasies with a pleasant and edifying frankness; in Venice, for example, or at Capri, the delectable isle, romance might be seized, as it were, in the act, and all manner of oddities were displayed with a most diverting effrontery: in those places you meet middle-aged pairs, uncertainly related, whose vehement adventures startled the decorum of a previous generation; you discover how queer may be the most conventional, how ordinary the most eccentric. Miss Ley, with her discreet knack for extracting confidence, after her own staid fashion enjoyed herself immensely; she listened to the strange confessions of men who for their souls' sake had abandoned the greatness of the world, and now spoke of their past zeal with indulgent irony, of women who for love had been willing to break down the very pillars of heaven, and now shrugged their shoulders in amused recollection of passion long since dead.

"Well, what have you fresh to tell me?" asked Frank, having met Miss Ley at Victoria, when he sat down to dinner in Old Queen Street.

"Nothing much. But I've noticed that when pleasure has exhausted a man he's convinced that he has exhausted pleas-

ure; then he tells you gravely that nothing can satisfy the human heart."

But Frank had more important news than this, for Jenny, a week before, was delivered of a still-born child, and had been so ill that it was thought she could not recover; now, however, the worst was over, and if nothing untoward befell, she might be expected slowly to regain health.

"How does Basil take it?" asked Miss Ley.

"He says very little; he's grown silent of late, but I'm afraid he's quite heart-broken. You know how enormously he looked forward to the baby."

"D'you think he's fond of his wife?"

"He's very kind to her. No one could have been gentler than he after the catastrophe. I think she was the more cut up of the two, You see, she looked upon it as the reason of their marriage—and he's been doing his best to comfort her."

"I must go down and see them. And now tell me about Mrs. Castillyon."

"I haven't set eyes on her for ages."

Miss Ley observed Frank with deliberation. She wondered if he knew of the affair with Reggie Bassett, but, though eager to discuss it, would not risk to divulge a secret. In point of fact, he was familiar with all the circumstances, but it amused him to counterfeit ignorance that he might see how Miss Ley guided the conversation to the point she wanted. She spoke of the Dean of Tercanbury, of Bella and her husband, then, as though by chance, mentioned Reggie; but the twinkling of Frank's eyes told her that he was laughing at her stratagem.

"You brute!" she cried, "why didn't you tell me all about it, instead of letting me discover the thing by accident?"

"My sex suggests to me certain elementary notions of honour, Miss Ley."

"You needn't add priggishness to your other detestable vices. How did you know they were carrying on in this way?"

"The amiable youth told me. There are very few men who can refrain from boasting of their conquests, and certainly Reggie isn't one of them."

"You don't know Hugh Kearon, do you? He's had affairs all over Europe, and the most notorious was with a royal princess who shall be nameless; I think she would have bored him to death if he hadn't been able to flourish ostentatiously a handkerchief with a royal crown in the corner and a large initial."

Miss Ley then gave her account of the visit to Rochester, and certainly made of it a very neat and entertaining story.

"And did you think for a moment that this would be the end of the business?" asked Frank, ironically.

"Don't be spiteful because I hoped for the best."

"Dear Miss Ley, the bigger blackguard a man is, the more devoted are his lady-loves. It's only when a man is decent and treats women as if they were human beings that he has a rough time of it."

"You know nothing about these things, Frank," retorted Miss Ley. "Pray give me the facts, and the philosophical conclusions I can draw for myself."

"Well, Reggie has a natural aptitude for dealing with the sex. I heard all about your excursion to Rochester, and went so far as to assure him that you wouldn't tell his mamma. He perceived that he hadn't cut a very heroic figure, so he mounted the high horse, and, full of virtuous indignation, for a month took no notice whatever of Mrs. Castillyon. Then she wrote most humbly, begging him to forgive her; and this, I understand, he graciously did. He came to see me, flung the letter on the table, and said: 'There, my boy, if any one asks you, say that what I don't know about women ain't worth knowing.' Two days later he appeared with a gold cigarette-case!"

"What did you say to him?"

"One of these days you'll come the very devil of a cropper.'"

"You showed wisdom and emphasis. I hope with all my heart, he will."

"I don't imagine things are going very smoothly," proceeded Frank. "Reggie tells me she leads him a deuce of a life, and he's growing restive; it appears to be no joke to have a woman desperately in love with you. And then he's never been on such familiar terms with a person of quality, and he's shocked by her vulgarity; her behaviour seems often to outrage his sense of decorum."

"Isn't that like an Englishman! He cultivates propriety even in the immoral."

Then Miss Ley asked Frank about himself, but they had corresponded with diligence, and he had little to tell; the work at Saint Luke's went on monotonously, lectures to students three times a week and out-patients on Wednesday and Saturday; people were beginning to come to his consulting-room in Harley Street, and he looked forward, without great enthusiasm, to the future of a fashionable physician.

"And are you in love?"

"You know I shall never permit my affections to wander so long as you remain single," he answered, laughing.

"Beware I don't take you at your word and drag you by the hair of your head to the altar. Have I no rival?"

"Well, if you press me, I will confess."

"Monster! what is her name?"

"*Bilharzia Holmatobi.*"

"Good heavens!"

"It's a parasite I'm studying. I think authorities are all wrong about it; they've not got its life-history right, and the stuff they believe about the way people catch it is sheer footle."

"It doesn't sound frightfully thrilling to me, and I'm under the impression you're only trumping it up to conceal some scandalous amour with a ballet-girl."

Miss Ley's visit to Barnes seemed welcome neither to Jenny nor to Basil, who looked harassed and unhappy, and only with a visible effort assumed a cheerful manner when he addressed his wife. Jenny was still in bed, very weak and ill, but Miss Ley, who had never before seen her, was surprised at her great beauty; her face, whiter than the pillows against which it rested, had a very touching pathos, and, notwithstanding all that had gone before, that winsome, innocent sweetness which has occasioned the comparison of English maidens to the English rose. The observant woman noticed also the painful, questioning anxiety with which Jenny continually glanced at her husband, as though pitifully dreading some unmerited reproach.

"I hope you like my wife," said Basil, when he accompanied Miss Ley downstairs.

"Poor thing! She seems to me like a lovely bird imprisoned by fate within the four walls of practical life, who should by rights sing careless songs under the open skies. I'm afraid you'll be very unkind to her."

"Why?" he asked, not without resentment.

"My dear, you'll make her live up to your blue china teapot. The world might be so much happier if people wouldn't insist on acting up to their principles."

Mrs. Bush had been hurriedly sent for when Jenny's condition seemed dangerous, but, in her distress and excitement, she had sought solace in Basil's whiskey-bottle to such an extent that he was obliged to beg her to return to her own home. The scene was not edifying. Surmising an alcoholic tendency, Kent, two or three days after her arrival, locked the side-board and removed the key. But in a little while the servant came to him.

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Bush says, can she 'ave the whiskey; she's not feelin' very well."

"I'll go to her."

Mrs. Bush sat in the dining-room with folded hands, doing

her utmost to express on a healthy countenance maternal anxiety, indisposition, and ruffled dignity; she was not vastly pleased to see her son-in-law instead of the expected maid.

"Oh, is that you, Basil?" she said; "I can't find the sideboard key anywhere, and I'm that upset I must 'ave a little drop of something."

"I wouldn't if I were you, Mrs. Bush. You're much better without it."

"Oh, indeed!" she answered, bristling. "P'raps you know more about me inside feelings than I do myself. I'll just trouble you to give me the key, young man, and look sharp about it. I'm not a woman to be put upon by any one, and I tell you straight."

"I'm very sorry, but I think you've had quite enough to drink. Jenny may want you, and you would be wise to keep sober."

"D'you mean to insinuate that I've 'ad more than I can carry?"

"I wouldn't go quite so far as that," he answered, smiling.

"Thank you for nothing," cried Mrs. Bush indignantly. "And I should be obliged if you wouldn't laugh at me, and I must say it's very 'eartless with me daughter lying ill in her bedroom. I'm very much upset and I did think you'd treat me like a lady, but you never 'ave, Mr. Kent—no, not even the first time I come here. Oh, I 'aven't forgot, so don't you think I 'ave—a sixpenny 'alfpenny teapot was good enough for me, but when your lady-friend come in out pops the silver, and I don't believe for a moment it's real silver. Blood's all very well, Mr. Kent, but what I say is, give me manners. You're a nice young feller, you are, to grudge me a little drop of spirits when me poor daughter's on her death-bed. I wouldn't stay another minute in this 'ouse if it wasn't for 'er."

"I was going to suggest it would be better if you returned to your happy home in Crouch End," answered Basil, when the good woman stopped to take breath.

"Were you, indeed! Well, we'll just see what Jenny 'as to say to that. I suppose my daughter is mistress in 'er own 'ouse."

Mrs. Bush started to her feet and made for the door, but Basil stood with his back against it.

"I can't allow you to go to her now. I don't think you're in a fit state."

"D'you think I'm going to let you prevent me? Get out of my way, young man."

Basil, more disgusted than out of temper, looked at the angry creature with a cold scorn which was not easy to stomach.

"I'm sorry to hurt your feelings, Mrs. Bush, but I think you'd better leave this house at once. Fanny will put your things together. I'm going to Jenny's room, and I forbid you to come to it. I expect you to be gone in half an hour."

He turned on his heel, leaving Mrs. Bush furious but intimidated. She was so used to have her own way that opposition took her aback, and Basil's manner did not suggest that he would easily suffer contradiction. But she made up her mind, whatever the consequences, to force her way into Jenny's room, and there set out her grievance. She had not done repeating to herself what she would say when the servant entered to state that, according to her master's order, she had packed Mrs. Bush's things. Jenny's mother started up indignantly, but pride forbade her to let the maid see she was turned out.

"Quite right, Fanny! This isn't the 'ouse that a lady would stay in, and I pity you, my dear, for 'aving a master like my son-in-law. You can tell 'im with my compliments that 'e's no gentleman."

Jenny, who was asleep, woke at the slamming of the front-door.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Your mother has gone away, dearest. D'you mind?"

She looked at him quickly, divining from knowledge of her parent's character that some quarrel had occurred and anxious to see that Basil was not annoyed. She gave him her hand.

"No, I'm glad. I want to be alone with you. I don't want any one to come between us."

He bent down and kissed her, and she put her arms round his neck.

"You're not angry with me because the baby died?"

"My darling, how could I be?"

"Say that you don't regret having married me."

Jenny, realising by now that Basil had married her only on account of the child, was filled with abject terror; his interests were so different from hers (and she had but gradually come to understand how great was the separation between them) that the longed-for son alone seemed able to preserve to her Basil's affection. It was the mother he loved, and now he might bitterly repent his haste, for it seemed she had forced marriage upon him by false pretenses. The chief tie that bound them was severed, and though with meek gratitude accepting the attentions suggested by his kindness, she asked herself with aching heart what would happen on her recovery.

Time passed, and Jenny, though ever pale and listless, grew strong enough to leave her room. It was proposed that in a little while she should go with her sister for a month to Brighton; Basil's work prevented him from leaving London for long, but he promised to run down for the week-end. One afternoon he came home in high spirits, having just received from his publishers a letter to say that his book had found favour and would be issued in the coming spring. It seemed the first step to the renown he sought. He found James Bush, his brother-in-law, seated with Jenny, and, in his elation, greeted him with unusual cordiality; but James lacked his usual facetious flow of conversation, and wore indeed a hang-dog air, which at another time would have excited Basil's attention. He took his leave at once, and then Basil noticed

that Jenny was much disturbed. Though he knew nothing for certain, he had an idea that the family of Bush came to his wife when they were in financial straits, but from the beginning had decided that such inevitable claims must be satisfied; he preferred, however, to ignore the help which Jenny gave, and, when she asked for some small sum beyond her allowance, handed it without question.

"Why was Jimmie here at this hour?" he asked, carelessly, thinking him bound on some such errand. "I thought he didn't leave his office till six."

"Oh, Basil, something awful has happened! I don't know how to tell you; he's sacked."

"I hope he doesn't want us to keep him," answered Basil, coldly. "I'm very hard up this year, and all the money I have I want for you."

Jenny braced herself for a painful effort. She looked away and her voice trembled.

"I don't know what's to be done. He's got into trouble. Unless he can find a hundred and fifteen pounds in a week, his firm are going to prosecute."

"What on earth d'you mean, Jenny?"

"Oh, Basil, don't be angry! I was so ashamed to tell you, I've been hiding it for a month; but now I can't any more. Something went wrong with his accounts."

"D'you mean to say he's been stealing?" asked Basil, sternly; and a feeling of utter horror and disgust came over him.

"For God's sake, don't look at me like that!" she cried, for his eyes, his firm-set mouth, made her feel a culprit confessing on her own account some despicable crime. "He didn't mean to be dishonest. I don't exactly understand, but he can tell you how it all was. Oh, Basil, you won't let him be sent to prison! Couldn't he have the money instead of my going away?"

Basil sat down at his desk to think out the matter, and,

resting his face thoughtfully on his hands, sought to avoid Jenny's fixed, appealing gaze; he did not want her to see the consternation, the abject shame, with which her news oppressed him. But all the same she saw.

"What are you thinking about, Basil?"

"Nothing particular. I was wondering how to raise the money."

"You don't think because he's my brother I must be tarred with the same brush?"

He looked at her without answering; it was certainly unfortunate that his wife's mother should drink more than was seemly and her brother have but primitive ideas about property.

"It's not my fault," she cried, with bitter pain, interrupting his silence. "Don't think too hardly of me."

"No, it's not your fault," he answered, with involuntary coldness. "You must go away to Brighton all the same, but I'm afraid it means no holiday in the summer."

He wrote a cheque and then a letter to his bank begging them to advance a hundred pounds on securities they held.

"There he is," cried Jenny, hearing a ring. "I told him to come back in half an hour."

Basil got up.

"You'd better give the cheque to your brother at once. Say that I don't wish to see him."

"Isn't he to come here any more, Basil?"

"That is as you like, Jenny. If you wish, we'll pretend he was unfortunate rather than—dishonest; but I'd rather he didn't refer to the matter. I want neither his thanks nor his excuses."

Without answering, Jenny took the cheque. She would have given a great deal to fling her arms gratefully round Basil's neck, begging him to forgive, but there was a hardness in his manner which frightened her. All the evening he sat in moody silence, and Jenny dare not speak; his kiss when

he bade her good-night had never been so frigid, and, unable to sleep, she cried bitterly. She could not understand the profound abhorrence with which he looked upon the incident; to her mind, it was little more than a mischance occasioned by Jimmie's excessive sharpness, and she was disposed to agree with her brother that only luck had been against him. She somewhat resented Basil's refusal to hear any defence and his complete certainty that the very worst must be true.

A few days later, coming unexpectedly, Kent found Jenny in earnest conversation with her brother, who had quite regained his jaunty air and betrayed no false shame at Basil's knowledge of his escapade.

"Well met, 'Oratio!" he cried, holding out his hand. "I just come in on the chance of seeing you. I wanted to thank you for that loan."

"I'd rather you didn't speak of it."

"Why, there's nothing to be ashamed of. I 'ad a bit of bad luck, that 's all. I'll pay you back, you know; you needn't fear about that."

He gave a voluble account of the affair, proving how misfortune may befall the deserving, and what a criminal complexion the most innocent acts may wear. Basil, against his will admiring the fellow's jocose effrontery, listened with chilling silence.

"You need not excuse yourself," he said, at length. "My reasons for helping you were purely selfish. Except for Jenny, it would have been a matter of complete indifference to me if you had been sent to prison or not."

"Oh, that was all kid! They wouldn't have prosecuted. Don't I tell you they had no case. You believe me, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"What d'you mean by that?" asked James, angrily.

"We won't discuss it."

The other did not answer, but shot at Basil a glance of singular malevolence.

"You can whistle for your money, young feller," he muttered, under his breath. "You won't get much out of me."

He had but small intention of paying back the rather large sum, but now abandoned even that. During the six months since Jenny's marriage he had never been able to surmount the freezing politeness with which Basil used him; he hated him for his supercilious air, but, needing his help, took care, though sometimes he could scarcely keep his temper, to preserve a familiar cordiality. He knew his brother-in-law would welcome an opportunity to forbid him the house, and this, especially now that he was out of work, he determined to avoid; he stomached the affront as best he could, but solaced his pride with the determination sooner or later to revenge himself.

"Well, so long," he cried, with undiminished serenity, "I'll be toddling."

Jenny watched this scene with some alarm, but with more irritation, since Basil's frigid contempt for her brother seemed a reflection on himself.

"You might at least be polite to him," she said, when Jimmie was gone.

"I'm afraid I've pretty well used up all my politeness."

"After all, he is my brother."

"That is a fact I deplore with all my heart," he answered.

"You needn't be so hard on him now he's down. He's no worse than plenty more."

Basil turned to her with flaming eyes.

"Good God, don't you realise the man's a thief! Doesn't it mean anything to you that he's dishonest? Don't you see how awful it is that a man—"

He broke off with a gesture of disgust. It was the first quarrel they ever had, and a shrewish look came to Jenny's face, her pallor gave way to an angry flush. But quickly

Basil recovered himself; recollecting his wife's illness and her bitter disappointment at the poor babe's death, he keenly regretted the outburst.

"I beg your pardon, Jenny. I didn't mean to say that. I should have remembered you were fond of him."

But, since she did not answer, looking away somewhat sulkily, he sat down on the arm of her chair and stroked her wonderful, rich tresses.

"Don't be cross, darling. We won't quarrel, will we?"

Unable to resist his tenderness, tears came to her eyes, and passionately she kissed his caressing hands.

"No, no," she cried. "I love you too much. Don't ever speak angrily to me; it hurts so awfully."

The momentary cloud passed, and they spoke of the approaching visit to Brighton. Jenny was to take lodgings, and she made him promise faithfully that he would come every Saturday. Frank had offered a room in Harley Street, and while she was away Basil meant to stay with him.

"You won't forget me, Basil?"

"Of course not! But you must hurry up and get well and come back."

When at length she set off, and Basil found himself Frank's guest, he could not suppress a slight sigh of relief; it was very delightful to live again in a bachelor's rooms, and he loved the smell of smoke, the untidy litter of books, the lack of responsibility: there was no need to do anything he did not like, and, for the first time since his marriage, he felt entirely comfortable. Recalling his pleasant rooms in the Temple—and there was about them an old-world air which amiably fitted his humour—he thought of the long conversations of those days, the hours of reverie, the undisturbed ease with which he could read books; and he shuddered at the pokey villa which was now his home, the worries of housekeeping, and the want of privacy. He had meant his life to be so beautiful, and it was merely sordid.

"There are advantages in single blessedness," laughed the Doctor, when he saw Basil after breakfast light his pipe and, putting his feet on the chimney-piece, lean back with a sigh of content.

But he regretted his words when he saw on the other's mobile face a look of singular wistfulness: it was his first indication that things were not going very well with the young couple.

"By the way," Frank suggested, presently, "would you care to come to a party to-night? Lady Edward Stringer is giving some sort of function, and there'll be a lot of people you know."

"I've been nowhere since my marriage," Basil answered, irresolutely.

"I shall be seeing the old thing to-day. Shall I ask if I can bring you?"

"It would be awfully good of you. By Jove, I should enjoy it." He gave a laugh. "I've not had evening clothes on for six months."

CHAPTER XV

Six months went by, and again the gracious airs of summer blew into Miss Ley's dining-room in Old Queen Street. She sat at luncheon with Mrs. Castillyon wonderfully rejuvenated by a winter in the East; for Paul, characteristically anxious to combine self-improvement with pleasure, had suggested that they should mark their reconciliation by a journey to India, where they might enjoy a second, pleasanter honeymoon, and he at the same time study various questions which would be to him of much political value. Mrs. Castillyon, in a summer frock, had all her old daintiness of a figurine in Dresden china, and her former vivacity was more charming by reason of an added tenderness; she emphasised her change of mind by allowing her hair to regain its natural colour.

"D'you like it, Mary?" she asked. "Paul says it makes me look ten years younger. And I've stopped slapping up."

"Entirely?" asked Miss Ley, with a smile.

"Of course, I powder a little, but that doesn't count; and you know, I never use a puff now—only a leather. You can't think how we enjoyed ourselves in India, and Paul's a perfect duck. He's been quite awfully good to me, I'm simply devoted to him, and I think we shall get a baronetcy at the next birthday honours."

"The reward of virtue."

Mrs. Castillyon coloured and laughed.

"You know, I'm afraid I shall become a most awful prig, but the fact is it's so comfortable to be good and to have nothing to reproach one's self with. . . . Now tell me about every one. Where did you pass the winter?"

"I went to Italy as usual; and my cousin Algernon, with his daughter, spent a month with me, at Christmas."

"Was she awfully cut up at the death of her husband?"

There was really a note of genuine sympathy in Mrs. Castillyon's voice, so that Miss Ley realised how sincere was the change in her.

"She bore it very wonderfully, and I think she's curiously happy; she tells me that she feels constantly the presence of Herbert." Miss Ley paused. "Bella has collected her husband's verses, and wishes to publish them, and she's written a very touching account of his life and death by way of preface."

"Are they any good?"

"No; that's just the tragedy of the whole thing. I never knew a man whose nature was so entirely poetical, and yet he never wrote a line which is other than mediocre. If he'd only written his own feelings, his little hopes and disappointments, he might have done something good; but he's only produced pale imitations of Swinburne and Tennyson and Shelley. I can't understand how Herbert Field, who was so simple and upright, should never have turned out a single stanza which wasn't stilted and forced. I think in his heart he felt that he hadn't the gift of literary expression, which has nothing to do with high ideals, personal sincerity, or the seven deadly virtues, for he was not sorry to die. He only lived to be a great poet, and before the end realised that he would never have become one."

Miss Ley saw already the pretty little book which Bella would publish at her own expense, the neat type and wide margin, the dainty binding; she saw the scornful neglect of reviewers, and the pile of copies which eventually Bella would take back and give one by one as presents to her friends, who would thank her warmly, but never trouble to read ten lines.

"And what has happened to Reggie Bassett?" asked Grace, suddenly.

Miss Ley gave her a quick glance, but the steadiness of Mrs. Castillyon's eyes told her that she asked the question

indifferently, perhaps to show how entirely her infatuation was overcome.

"You heard that he married?"

"I saw it in the *Morning Post*."

"His mother was very indignant, and for three months refused to speak to him. But at last I was able to tell her that an heir was expected; so she made up her mind to swallow her pride, and became reconciled with her daughter-in-law, who is a very nice, sensible woman."

"Pretty?" asked Grace.

"Not at all, but eminently capable. Already she has made Reggie into quite a decent member of society. Mrs. Bassett has now gone down to Bournemouth, where the young folks have taken a house, to be at hand when the baby appears."

"It's reassuring to think that the ancient race of the Barlow-Bassetts will not be extinguished," murmured Grace, ironically. "I gathered that your young friend was settling down because one day he returned every penny I had—lent him."

"And what did you do with it?" asked Miss Ley.

Grace flushed and smiled whimsically.

"Well, it happened to reach me just before our wedding-day so I spent it all in a gorgeous pearl pin for Paul. He was simply delighted."

Mrs. Castillyon got up, and, when she was gone, Miss Ley took a letter that had come before luncheon, but which her guest's arrival had prevented her from opening. It was from Basil, who had spent the whole winter on Miss Ley's recommendation in Seville; she opened it curiously, for it was the first time he had written to her since, after the inquest, he left England.

> "*My Dear Miss Ley:* Don't think me ungrateful if I have left you without news of me, but at first I felt I could not write to people in England; whenever I thought of them everything came back, and it was only by a des-

perate effort that I could forget. For some time it seemed to me that I could never face the world again, and I was tormented by self-reproach; I vowed to give up my whole life to the expression of my deep regret, and fancied I could never again have a peaceful moment or anything approaching happiness. But presently I was ashamed to find that I began to regain my old temper; I caught myself at times laughing contentedly, amused and full of spirits; and I upbraided myself bitterly because, only a few weeks after the poor girl's death, I could actually be entertained by trivial things. And then I don't know what came over me, for I could not help the thought that my prison door was opened; though I called myself brutal and callous, deep down in my soul arose the idea that the fates had given me another chance. The slate was wiped clean, and I could start fresh. I pretended even to myself that I wanted to die, but it was sheer hypocrisy—I wanted to live and to take life by both hands and enjoy it. I have such a desire for happiness, such an eager yearning for life in its fulness and glory. I made a ghastly mistake, and I suffered for it; heaven knows how terribly I suffered and how hard I tried to make the best of it. And perhaps it wasn't all my fault—even to you I feel ashamed of saying this; I ought to go on posing decently to the end—in this world, we're made to act and think things because others have thought them good; we never have a chance of going our own way; we're bound down by the prejudices and the morals of all and sundry. For God's sake, let us be free. Let us do this and that because we want to and because we must, not because other people think we ought. And d'you know the worst of the whole thing? If I'd acted like a blackguard and let Jenny go to the dogs, I should have remained happy and contented and proseperous; and she, I daresay, wouldn't have died. It's because I tried to do my duty that all this misery came about. The world held up an ideal, and I thought they meant one to act up to it: it never occurred to me that they would only sneer.

"Don't think too badly of me because I say these things; they have come to me here, and it was you who

sent me to Seville; you must have known what effect it would have on my mind, tortured and sick. It is a land of freedom, and at last I have become conscious of my youth. How can I forget the delight of wandering in the Sierpes, released from all imprisoning ties, watching the various movements as though it were a stage-play, yet half afraid that a falling curtain would bring back the unendurable reality. The songs, the dances, the happy idleness of orange-gardens by the Guadalquivir, the gay turbulence of Seville by night: I could not long resist it, and at last forgot everything but that time was short and the world was to the living.

"By the time you get this letter I shall be on my way home. Yours ever,

"Basil Kent."

Miss Ley read this letter with a smile and gave a little sigh.

"I suppose at that age one can afford to have no very conspicuous sense of humour," she murmured.

But she sent Basil a telegram asking him to stay, with the result that three days later the young man arrived, very brown after his winter in the sunshine, healthy, and better-looking than ever. Miss Ley had invited Frank to meet him at dinner, and the pair of them, with the cold unconcern of anatomists, observed what changes the intervening time had wrought on the impressionable nature. Basil was in high spirits, delighted to come back to his friends; but a discreet soberness, underlying his vivacity, suggested a more composed temperament: what he had gone through had given him perhaps a solid store of experience on which he could rest himself; he was less emotional and more mature. Miss Ley summed up her impressions next time she was alone with Frank.

"Every Englishman has a churchwarden shut away in his bosom—an old man of the sea whom it is next to impossible to shake off: sometimes you think he's asleep or dead, but he's wonderfully tenacious of life, and, sooner or later, you find him enthroned in full possession of the soul."

"I don't know what you mean by the word *soul*," interrupted Frank, "but if you do, pray go on."

"The churchwarden is waking up in Basil, and I feel sure he will have a very successful career. But I shall warn him not to let that ecclesiastical functionary get the upper hand."

Miss Ley waited for Basil to speak of Mrs. Murray, but after two days her patience was exhausted and she attacked him point blank. At the mention of the name his cheeks flamed.

"I daren't go and see her. After what happened, I can never see her again. I am steeling myself to forget."

"And are you succeeding?" she asked, drily.

"No, no; I shall never succeed. I'm more desperately in love with her than ever I was. But I couldn't marry her now—the recollection of poor Jenny would be continually between us, for it was we, Hilda and I, who drove her to her death."

"Don't be a melodramatic idiot," answered Miss Ley, sharply. "You talk like the persecuted hero of a penny novelette. Hilda's very fond of you, and she has the feminine common sense which alone counterbalances in the world the romantic folly of men. What on earth do you imagine is the use of making yourselves wretched so that you may cut a picturesque figure? I should have thought you were cured of heroics. You wrote and told me that the world was for the living—an idea which has truth rather than novelty to recommend it—and do you think there is any sense in posturing absurdly to impress an inattentive gallery?"

"How do I know that Hilda cares for me still? She may hate me because I brought on her shame and humiliation."

"If I were you, I'd go and ask her," laughed Miss Ley. "And go with good heart, for she cared for you for your physical attractiveness rather than for your character. And that, I may tell you, whatever moralists say, is infinitely more reliable; since you may easily be mistaken in a person's

character, but his good looks are obvious and visible. You're handsomer than ever you were."

When Basil set out to call on Mrs. Murray, Miss Ley amused herself with conjecturing ironically the scene of their meeting: with curling lips she noted in her mind's eye the embarrassed handshake, the trivial conversation, the disconcerting silence, and without sympathy imagined the gradual warmth and the passionate declaration that followed. She moralised.

"A common mistake of writers is to make their characters, in moments of great emotion, express themselves with good taste: nothing could be more false, for, at such times, people, however refined, use precisely the terms of the *Family Herald*. The utterance of violent passion is never artistic, but trite, ridiculous, and grotesque, vulgar often, and silly." Miss Ley smiled. "Probably novelists alone make love in a truly romantic manner; but then it's ten to one they're quoting from some unpublished work, or are listening intently to themselves in admiration of their glowing and polished phraseology."

At all events, the interview between Hilda and Basil was eminently satisfactory, as may be seen by the following letter which some days later the young man received.

> "*Mon cher enfant:* It is with the greatest surprise and delight that I read in this morning's *Post* of your engagement to Mrs. Murray. You have fallen on your feet, *mon ami*, and I congratulate you. Don't you remember that Becky Sharp said she could be very good on five thousand a year, and the longer I live the more convinced I am that this is a *vraie vérité:* with a house in Charles Street and *le reste*, you will find the world a very different place to live in; you will grow more human, dress better, and be less censorious. Do come to luncheon to-morrow, and bring Mrs. Murray; there will be a few people, and I hope it will be amusing—one o'clock. I'm afraid it's an extraordinary hour to lunch, but I'm going to be received into the Catholic Church in the morning, and we'er all coming on here afterward. I

mean to assume the names of the two saints whose example has most assisted me in my conversion, and henceforth shall sign myself,

"Your affectionate mother,
"MARGUÉRITE ELIZABETH CLAIRE VIZARD.

"*P. S.*—The Duke of St. Olpherts is going to be my sponsor."

A month late, Hilda Murray and Basil were married in *All Souls* by the Rev. Collinson Farley; Miss Ley gave away the bride, and in the church, besides, were only the verger and Frank Hurrell. Afterward, in the vestry, Miss Ley shook the Vicar's hand.

"I think it went off very nicely. It was charming of you to offer to marry them."

"The bride is a very dear friend of mine; I was anxious to give her this proof of my goodwill at the beginning of her new life." He paused and smiled benignly, so that Miss Ley, who knew something of his old attachment to Hilda, wondered at his good spirits; she had never seen him more trim and imposing—he looked already every inch a bishop. "Shall I tell you a great secret?" he added blandly. "I am about to contract an alliance with Florence, Lady Newhaven. We shall be married at the end of the season."

"My dear Mr. Farley, I congratulate you with all my heart. I see already these shapely calves encased in the gaiters episcopal."

Mr. Farley smiled pleasantly, for he made a practice of appreciating the jests of elderly maiden ladies with ample means, and he could boast that to his sense of humour was due the luxurious appointing of his church; for no place of worship in the West End had more beautiful altar-cloths, handsomer ornaments; nowhere could be seen smarter hassocks for the knees of the devout, or hymn-books in a more excellent state of preservation.

The newly married couple meant to spend their honey-

moon on the river, and, having lunched in Charles Street, started immediately.

"I'm thankful they don't want us to see them off at Paddington," said Frank, when he walked with Miss Ley toward the park.

"Why are you in such an abominable temper?" she asked, smiling. "During luncheon, I was twice on the point of reminding you that marriage is an event at which a certain degree of hilarity is not indecorous."

Frank did not answer, and now they turned into one of the park gates: in that gay June weather, the place was crowded; though the hour was early still, motors tore along with hurried panting, carriages passed tranquil and dignified; the well-dressed London throng sat about idly on chairs or lounged up and down looking at their neighbours, talking light-heartedly of the topics of the hour. Frank's eyes travelled over them slowly, and shuddering a little, his brow grew strangely dark.

"During that ceremony and afterward I could think of nothing but Jenny. It's only eighteen months since I signed my name for Basil's first marriage in a dingy registry office. You don't know how beautiful the girl was on that day—full of love and gratitude and happiness; she looked forward to the future with such eager longing! And now she's rotting underground, and the woman she hated and the man she adored are married, and they haven't a thought for all her misery. I hated Basil in his new frock coat, and Hilda Murray, and you: I can't imagine why a sensible woman like you should overdress ridiculously for such a function."

Miss Ley, conscious of the entire success of her costume, could afford to smile at this.

"I have observed that, whenever you're out of humour with yourself, you insult me," she murmured.

Frank went on, his face hard and set, his dark eyes glowering fiercely.

"It all seemed so useless. It seemed that the wretched girl had to undergo such frighful torture merely to bring these two commonplace creatures together. They must have no imagination, or no shame—how could they marry with that unhappy death between them? For, after all, it was they who killed her. And d'you think Basil is grateful because Jenny gave him her youth and her love, her wonderful beauty and at last her life? He doesn't think of her. And you, too, because she was a barmaid, are convinced that it's a very good thing she's out of the way. The only excuse I can see for them is that they're blind instruments of fate: nature was working through them, obscurely—working to join them together for her own purposes, and, because Jenny came between, she crushed her ruthlessly."

"I can find a better excuse for them than that," answered Miss Ley, looking gravely at Frank; "I forgive them because they're human and weak. The longer I live, the more I am overwhelmed by the utter, utter weakness of men; they do try to do their duty, they do their best honestly, they seek straight ways—but they're dreadfully weak. And so I think one ought to be sorry for them and make all possible allowances—I'm afraid it sounds rather idiotic, but I find the words now most frequently on my lips are: forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They walked silently, and after a while Frank stopped on a sudden and faced Miss Ley. He pulled out his watch.

"It's quite early yet, and we have the afternoon before us. Will you come with me to the cemetery where Jenny is buried?"

"Why not let the dead lie? Let us think of life, rather than of death."

Frank shook his head.

"I must go. I couldn't rest otherwise. I can't bear that, on this day, she should be entirely forgotten."

"Very well. I will come with you."

They turned round and came out of the park; Frank hailed a cab, and they started. They passed the pompous mansions of the great, sedate, and magnificent, and, driving north, traversed long streets of smaller dwellings, dingy and gray notwithstanding the brightness of the sky; they went on, it seemed, interminably, and each street strangely, awfully, resembled its predecessor; they came to roads where each house was separate and had its garden, and there were trees and flowers—they were the habitations of merchants and stock-brokers, and had a trim, respectable look, self-satisfied and smug; but these they left behind for more crowded parts; and now it seemed a different London, more vivacious, more noisy; the way was thronged with trams and 'buses, and there were coster-barrows along the pavements; the shops were gaudy and cheap, and the houses mean; they drove through slums, with children playing merrily on the curb and women in dirty aprons, blousy and dishevelled, lounging about their doorsteps. At length they reached a broad, straight road, white and dusty and unshaded, and knew their destination was at hand, for occasionally they passed a shop where grave-stones were made; and an empty hearse trundled by, the mutes huddled on the box, laughing loudly, smoking after the fatigue of their accustomed work. The cemetery came in sight, and they stopped at iron gates and walked in: it was a vast place, crowded with every imaginable kind of funeral ornament which glistened white and cold in the sun; it was hideous, vulgar, and sordid, and one shuddered to think of the rude material minds of those who could bury folk they loved in that restless ground wherein was neither peace nor silence; they might prate of the soul's immortality, but surely in their hearts they looked upon the dead as common clay, or they would never have borne that they should lie till the Day of Judgment in that unhallowed spot. There was about it a gross, businesslike air that was infinitely depressing. Frank and Miss Ley walked through, passing a

knot of persons, black-robed, about an open grave, where a curate uttered hastily, with the boredom of long habit, the most solemn words that man has ever penned:

"*Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.*"

Miss Ley, pale of face, took Frank's arm and hurried on. Here and there dead flowers were piled upon new graves; here and there the earth was but freshly turned. They came at last to where Jenny lay—an oblong stone of granite whereon was cut a simple cross; and Frank gave a sudden cry, for it was covered at that moment, so that only the cross was outlined, with red roses. For a while they stared in silence, amazed.

"They're quite fresh," said Miss Ley; "they were put here this morning." She turned to Frank and looked at him slowly. "You said they'd forgotten—and they came on their wedding day and laid roses on her grave."

"D'you think she came, too?"

"I'm sure of it. Ah, Frank, I think one should forgive them a good deal for that! I told you that they did strive to do right, and if they fell it was only because they were human and very weak. Don't you think it's better for us to be charitable? I wonder if we should have surmounted any better than they did their great difficulties and their great temptations."

Frank made no reply, and for a long time they contemplated those rich red roses and thought of Hilda's tender hands laying them gently on the poor woman's cold grave-stone.

"You're right," he said at last. "I can forgive them a good deal because they had this thought. I hope they will be very happy."

"I think it's a good omen." She laid her hand on Frank's arm. "And now let us go away—for we are living, and the dead have nothing to say to us. You brought me here, and

now I want to take you on farther—to show you something more."

He did not understand, but followed obediently till they came to the cab; Miss Ley told the driver to go straight on, away from London, till she bade him stop. And then, leaving behind them that sad place of death, they came suddenly into the open; the highway had the pleasant brown hardness of a country road, and it was bordered by a hawthorn hedge; green fields stretched widely on either side, and they might have been a hundred miles from London town. Miss Ley stopped the cab, and told the man to wait whilst she and her friend walked on.

"Don't look back," she said to Frank, "only look forward. Look at the trees and the meadows."

The sky was singularly blue, and the dulcet breeze bore gracious savours of the country; there was a suave limpidity of the air which chased away all ugly thoughts. Both of them, walking quickly, breathed with wide lungs, inspiring eagerly the radiance of that summer afternoon. On a turn of the road Miss Ley gave a quick cry of delight, for she saw the hedge suddenly ablaze with wild roses.

"Have you a knife?" she said. "Do cut some."

And she stood while he gathered a great bunch of the simple fresh flowers; he gave them to her, and she held them with both hands.

"I love them because they're the same roses as grow in Rome from the sarcophagi in the gardens; they grow out of those old coffins to show us that life always triumphs over death. What do I care for illness and old age and disease! The world may be full of misery and disillusion, it may not give a tithe of what we ask; it may offer hatred instead of love—disappointment, wretchedness, triviality, and heaven knows what. But there is one thing that compensates for all the rest, that takes away the merry-go-round from a sordid show, and gives it a meaning, a solemnity, and a magnificence

which make it worth while to live. And for that one thing, all we suffer is richly overpaid."

"And what the Dickens is that?" asked Frank, smiling.

Miss Ley looked at him with laughing eyes, holding out the roses, her cheeks flushed.

"Why, beauty, you dolt," she cried gaily. "Beauty."

THE END

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